

# ERIE CANAL CRUISE

## **Erie Cruise quick reference...**

Type of report.....Erie Canal as a Cruising Destination

### **INTRODUCTION**

Is it the Erie Canal? Or the New York State Barge Canal? Or the Buffalo-Albany portion of the New York State Canal System controlled by the state's Throughway Authority? Whatever its most appropriate name, it is the current manifestation of a waterway that was conceived two centuries ago as a means of public transportation but is used today primarily for recreation. GLCC members often traverse it as part of the eastern water route between the Great Lakes and Florida, but it also merits consideration as a cruise venue in its own right.

Various circumstances led us to invite another couple, long-time friends, to join us for a one-week charter cruise on the part of the Erie Canal (as we will call it) between Rochester and Seneca Falls. This report of our experience may be of interest to readers who might enjoy a similar cruise as well as those planning to transit the entire canal. It is in

four parts: a brief historical review, some basic Erie Canal facts, an informal log of what we saw along the way, and a set of descriptions of the towns we visited. These stops are listed from east to west, not in the order in which we visited them.

### **A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

In the early nineteenth century, when the United States population was located primarily along the Atlantic coast but westward growth was beginning, the nation's leaders saw a need for a transportation system that could take new settlers and their belongings west and carry their crops and other products east for sale. Only limited unpaved roads—hardly more than trails—were available. Railroads were not yet practical (although they would be, sooner than the canal developers realized). Canals were proving their value in Europe, and water transportation was thought to have great promise in the United States.

Yes, but what route should a canal follow? If one postulated that the highest point on a canal to the west should go no more than 500 feet above sea level, survey reports showed that there were only two possibilities. Both led up the Hudson River from New York City. One turned west along the Mohawk River at Albany. The other continued north to the St. Lawrence River and then west. The former was chosen as the more practical and safe (geopolitically) of the two.



*The waterfront, Seneca Falls, NY. The charter boat is in the foreground...*

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The original Erie Canal followed the Mohawk River valley and then went overland west to the Niagara River near Buffalo, bypassing Niagara Falls and giving direct access to Lake Erie. The canal was opened fully in the year 1825.

It was originally 4 feet deep, but was enlarged to a depth of 7 feet by 1862. The project was a great success in opening “the west” (as then conceived) to settlement and facilitating commerce with the eastern seaboard area. It also contributed greatly to the rise of New York City as America’s biggest commercial center. The Erie served as a model for canal systems that developed in many Midwestern states, mostly in the 1830s.

The advent of the railroads cut into the business of the canals, and many of the others dwindled and died in subsequent decades. The Erie, however, managed to find enough freight traffic to keep it alive. The peak year for tonnage was 1951, after which it decreased dramatically. Today it serves recreational purposes almost exclusively. We saw no commercial vessels other than dredges and local excursion boats.

A major rebuilding occurred between 1905 and 1918. The route was altered over much of its length. For example, the original route passed through downtown Rochester, crossing over the Genesee River on a viaduct, but the present canal intersects at grade with the river a few miles farther upstream (south). The rebuilt canal was made wider and

deeper to accommodate larger commercial barges and renamed the New York Barge Canal.

The Erie Canal name has been restored in recent years and the focus has been on developing the waterway for recreational use. Towns along the canal have put in guest docks, many with electrical and city water connections, and have promoted local shops, parks, festivals, and historical features.

The history of the canal aqueduct over the Genesee River at Rochester is interesting. It was originally built in 1822-3 at what is now downtown Rochester. It was replaced by a wider, deeper aqueduct in 1842 as part of a project to make the canal usable by larger barges. It was abandoned in 1919 when much of the canal’s alignment was changed. The new route, which continues today, has the canal crossing the Genesee at grade a few miles upstream from the old crossing. In the early 1920s the canal route through Rochester, including the aqueduct, was taken over by the city as the route for a commuter subway railroad that operated from 1927 to 1957. A concrete street bridge was built over the tracks; it endures today as the Broad Street Bridge.

### SOME CANAL FACTS

The traditional speed limit on the canal has been 10 mph. In 2006 this was increased to 45 mph for portions on open rivers and lakes, but the 10 mph limit remains in effect on the dug sections (which is most of the canal). We saw no evidence of enforcement,

but the lock operators communicate with one another and they know how long it takes to travel from one lock to the next at 10 mph. Actually, the conscientious mariner will go considerably slower than that to prevent wake damage to the canal banks, private docks, and moored small craft.

Procedures related to locking are described in the following section. Tolls and lockage fees have been eliminated.

The nominal controlling depth is at least 12 feet, although shoaling may reduce that in some areas. There should be no problem anywhere for recreational craft, provided that you



*Approaching an Erie Canal lock. This is typical except for the vertical guard gate...*

stay in the middle third of the visible waterway—the banks slope gradually upward at the sides. Deadheads and dense weeds may be encountered in the shallows. The overhead clearance varies from 15 to 21 feet.

**CRUISE REPORT**

**Sunday, June 18, 2006:** We arrived at the Midlakes Navigation Company marina and charter base, located on the Erie Canal at Macedon, New York (southeast of Rochester) in the early afternoon. There were about a half dozen similar “hire boats” at the docks, with similar design features and identical paintwork.

Their style was reminiscent of photos of European canal boats. One of them was blocked up on land, permitting inspection of its normally submerged parts: long, narrow displacement hull of welded steel. Single screw with bow thruster. Tiller-controlled transom-hung rudder. There was a diagonal steel strut sloping downward and aft, located outboard of the propeller on each side, apparently intended to deflect deadheads away from the prop.

Our assigned boat, the *Canandaigua*, is 42 feet long. It has a canvas-covered bow cockpit suitable for casual lounging. Next aft is a generous-sized dinette and galley area. Aft of that are two similar staterooms, each with stowage, a double berth and a washstand. Two heads and a shower were tucked into corners. The interior is all wood-paneled. Far aft is a raised deck with an overhead canopy, the control pedestal, curved bench seating, and the tiller. The engine compartment, with a 50hp Yanmar diesel, is under that deck.

There was a binnacle compass, complete with baseball-size external compensators, but it served no useful purpose. On the Erie Canal, when you get up in the morning, if the sun is in your face you are going east, and if it's behind you you're going west. Four fenders were rigged on each side of the hull in a semi-permanent fashion. In line with what others were doing, we just left them dangling all week.

(This layout has one disadvantage: the two staterooms are

identical in configuration, which means that you can be in the wrong one and not realize it. More than once, I opened an under-berth drawer and realized that the items inside were not mine! Others in our party confessed to having the same experience.)

After stowing our gear and food and receiving the customary briefing on the vessel's systems and operation, we were ready to go. The charter agent went with us as far as the first lock, a distance of less than 5 miles. He did some coaching and—equally important—gave us his cell-phone number.

The trees and brush along the canal give a very different feeling from being on an open body of water. You can't see approaching weather as far away, but it doesn't matter much because little wind gets down to water level.

There are occasional navigational aids, mostly numbered day marks affixed to old lengths of railroad track that have been driven into the mud. It is important in a few areas to follow the book chart (supplied by the charterer) carefully, but mostly you just follow your nose. We saw no mile markers.

Most of the locks that we traversed are simple operations with less than a 20-foot lift. They are just over 300 feet long and about 45 feet wide. The lock tenders are friendly and helpful, but they do not handle lines.

You call them (VHF 13) when you are about a half mile away, giving your vessel name and direction of travel, and they tell you whether to proceed



*A steam launch on the Erie...*

directly into the lock or wait until it is ready. Red and green “traffic lights” tell you when to proceed into and out of the lock. A flashing red or green light is an instruction to stop and await instructions from the lock operator. We had no delays longer than a half hour. They routinely call ahead to the next lock you will be approaching, so it is advisable to advise the operator if you will be stopping before the next lock.

You are usually free to go to either side of the lock. Sometimes the wind direction influenced our decision, but most often we went to the side where the lock tender was, to make conversation easy. Occasionally the lock tender will direct you to one side or the other because of concern about under-water flow into or out of the lock.

To secure our position in a lock, two of our crew put on heavy gloves (provided by the charter company) and grabbed weighted lines hanging over the sides of the lock. One person stood in the forward cockpit and the other at the aft deck.

Shortly after clearing the first lock, I looked at the engine oil pressure gauge. Uh-oh! The needle was barely off the zero mark. A cell phone call to the charter agent brought a reassuring answer: don't worry if it moves at all—just obey the little placard on the pedestal that says not to exceed 2,300 rpm. A check of the engine hour meter made the picture clear: that Yanmar had run for several thousand hours and probably had well-worn bearings, but it still worked fine if it wasn't pushed too hard. We checked the oil level frequently that week and chose 2,200 rpm as our operating standard, and

everything was fine. We poked along at 5 knots, enjoyed the scenery, made good use of our bird book, and had a great time.

We traversed a second lock and tied up for the night at the town of Newark. It was all very casual—we called a posted telephone number and a pleasant local policeman stopped by to deliver a key to the showers and laundry room nearby.

**Monday, June 19:** This was our only rainy day, but it wasn't a major problem. There was canvas over our heads. High trees and undergrowth on either side of the canal broke the wind and eased our anxiety about being on a steel boat when lightning was flashing overhead. It didn't feel at all like being in similar weather on open water.

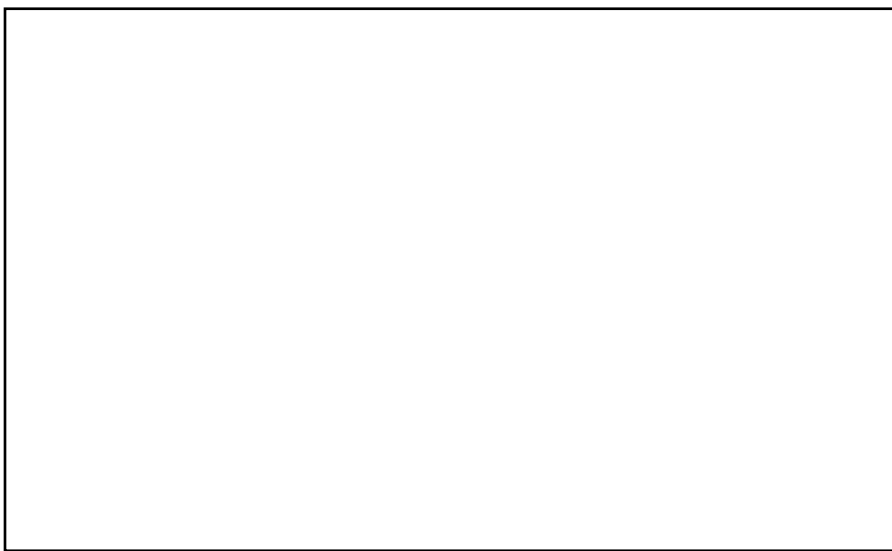
The other couple took turns at the tiller, and they quickly acquired the necessary understanding and skill, although self-confidence came somewhat more slowly.

This was the day that we learned about weeds getting caught on the rudder and perhaps also on those propeller guards welded to the bottom of the hull. When the engine starts laboring, the tiller feels heavy and the boat slows down and wants to wander to one side, you've got weeds. The fix, which we learned by trial and error, is to run the boat in reverse for a few seconds and then resume your course.

That day we ran only a couple of hours to our next stop, the town of Lyons. By the time we got there we had passed through two more locks and were a bit soggy. The rain let up in the afternoon permitting a tour of the town.

**Tuesday, June 20:** The rain had gone by, and the day was mostly sunny. This morning we passed through the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge, and the bird-watching was great. We saw hawks, kingfishers, herons, and a bald eagle, as well as less common species. There were also osprey nests, one with a sitting bird.

After noon we turned south at the junction with the Cayuga-Seneca branch canal. An hour later, just



*Restored iron change bridge, built in 1846, Palmyra, NY, one of many historic sites alongside the canal...*

before arriving at the town of Seneca Falls, we headed into a taller pair of locks than we had previously encountered, rising 25.9 feet in the first lock and 24.5 feet in the second one. A short distance past the second lock, we tied up at the town pier. The two wives devoted several hours that afternoon visiting sites associated with the United States women’s rights movement, which was born in Seneca Falls.

**Wednesday, June 21:** It was the first day of summer, with more sunshine. Retracing our course back down through the double locks, we learned a bit of trivia. On parts of the lock walls that are deeply submerged when the locks are full, we found ourselves face to face with thousands of zebra mussels as the water level dropped, and learned that those critters spit out tiny drops of water when the water recedes and they are exposed to the air. More great bird watching as we passed back through the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge, and then we tied up back at the town of Lyons.

As an old train-watcher, I found the Erie Canal experience frustrating in one respect. A heavily used main railroad line runs beside the canal in several places, but the two are separated by thick brush and trees. The result is that you can often hear a train passing you less than 50 yards away, but you can’t see it. This is the multiple-track “water level route” that connects New York City and Chicago (CSX, formerly Conrail, formerly Penn Central, formerly New York Central).

**Thursday, June 22:** We began the morning with a short run west to the town of Newark. Had lunch in town, walked around, and checked emails at the local library. As we sat by the canal eating ice cream, a half dozen small steam launches came by, most with their crews dressed in period clothing. Most of the boats were of the style of the *African Queen*, the steam launch featured in the classic eponymous Bogart-Hepburn movie. They were part of a group having a week-long gathering on the canal. We would see more of

them as we traveled west that afternoon and the next day.

Then it was on to Palmyra for the night. The other places where we tied up were concrete walls along the canal, but at Palmyra there is a small basin perpendicular to the canal on its south side.

**Friday, June 23:** There were more miles to travel today, but we had time for a walk west along the canal to the Aqueduct County Park. Its features include a reconstructed “change bridge” used by mules when the towpath on the original Erie Canal changed from one side to the other. It was built in the days before modern steel was invented—its compression members are made of cast iron and its tension members are of wrought iron. One of the original canal aqueducts, passing over a small stream, is preserved here.

We also walked to nearby Lock 29 where we were treated to a short history lesson from the lock tender and an explanation of the lock’s construction and operation.

After lunch and naps it was time to continue west through locks 29 and 30, past the charter base at Macedon, and on to the town of Fairport. Here, for the first time all week, we were charged for water and electric hookups and access to the showers—all of 10 dollars! We passed a moored local party boat as well as more restaurants and places to shop than in the smaller towns we had visited. That may reflect the fact that Fairport isn’t far from the major



*The canal at Fairport, NY. From left to right: charter boat, local dinner cruise boat, and one-of-a-kind vertical lift bridge...*

city of Rochester. Of particular interest is a one-of-a-kind vertical lift bridge with numerous odd design features. I was unable to figure out its idiosyncratic lift mechanism, even when passing under it by boat.

Bridges fascinate me, and as the week progressed I came to realize that the Erie Canal is a bridge-watcher's dream. There are spindly old truss bridges carrying local secondary roads. There are the massive Pratt truss bridges, some of staggered design, of the previously mentioned CSX main line.

Near the University of Rochester there's what appears to be a concrete arch bridge designed to look like an ancient stone arch bridge. In the center of Rochester we saw an elegant new bridge that consists of a dramatic steel (presumably) arch with vertical cables tying it to the roadway below (it was under construction when we saw it, but it is now in operation carrying Interstate Route 490).

**Saturday, June 24:** Continuing west, we saw increasing evidence of being near a metropolitan area: more joggers, walkers, and cyclists on the paved pathway along the canal, scullers and kayakers on the water, more nicely kept back yards of canal-side homes. At one point the canal is cut into the side of a hill, and on the "downhill" side you can look over the canal's brim into a valley about 70 feet lower than the water's surface.

We tied up to bollards at the town of Pittsford for a

brief walk, after which we transited locks 32 and 33 in the company of a large sailing catamaran, one of the few large pleasure craft seen all week (there were some local people fishing from small boats).

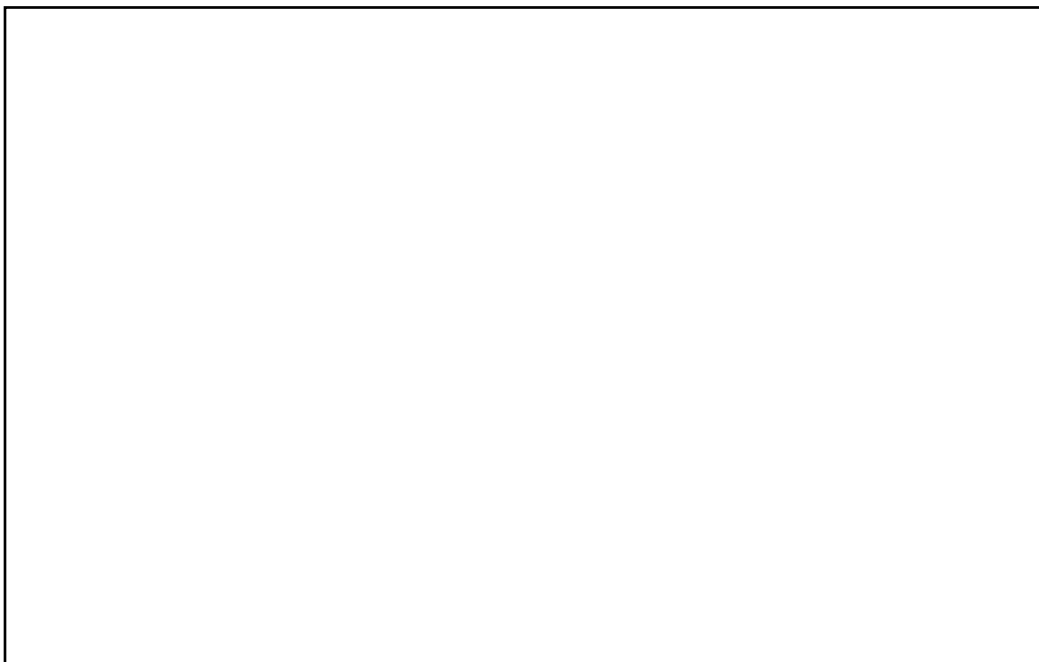
Nearing the intersection of the canal with the Genesee River, we passed under a large guillotine-style guard lock, one of a pair that can be lowered to protect the canal from flooding when the river floods. We turned north at the intersection for a brief visit to the city of Rochester, passing the extensive grounds of the University of Rochester along the way.

Approaching the city's center, we could see a dam blocking further travel downriver. Near it, still under construction, was the long, dramatic, very modern-looking bridge that appeared to be a single (presumably steel) arch with cables hanging vertically from it to support the roadway below.

The most suitable place we saw to tie up was a riverfront area called Corn Hill Landing, on the west side a short distance above the dam. The only business we found open there on a Saturday afternoon was a newly opened ice-cream parlor, which of course we patronized. Corn Hill Landing is a historic part of Rochester that is under redevelopment with homes, offices, restaurants, and shops of various kinds.

We dawdled too long at Rochester, and simple arithmetic told us that the trip back east to the charter base was going to be a race with darkness. Charter companies are typically strict about forbidding travel in the night hours, for obvious safety reasons. We spurred the Yanmar to the full 2,300 rpm and reached our destination just at twilight.

After sleeping aboard for the final time, we loaded our cars, completed the paperwork with the charter agent and drove home to northeastern Ohio.



*Lock 2 on the Cayuga-Seneca branch canal, near Seneca Falls, NY...*

**NOTES ON THE SPECIFIC PLACES TO DOCK**

The following observations are listed from east to west for the convenience of readers who may wish to visit one or more of them. With one exception (noted below), dockage and water and electric hookups were free at all of them.

**Seneca Falls** is located about 8 miles south of the Erie Canal, on a branch canal that provides access to two of the "Finger Lakes"—Seneca and Cayuga. It's a pleasant town most noted as the birthplace of the women's rights movement in the United States. Moor along the wall on the north side of the canal. In addition to shopping and restaurants, there is a Women's Rights National Historical Park with various facilities. The old building on the south side of the canal was once a water-powered knitting mill.

**Lyons** offers dockage at a long concrete wall on the north side of the canal. Most of this structure is inconveniently high, but there's a small lower area that is more suitable for boats with average free-board. Facilities at the fire station, just uphill from the canal. Good food at the Bridge Tavern, near the east end of the concrete wall. Trombino's Restaurant was also recommended to us. The old county courthouse has been undergoing restoration, and the town's old jail is now a museum. Both are well worth a visit.

**Newark** has dockage at walls on each side of the canal. The wall on the north side is rather high, but that's where the free hookups, shower facility, and laundry are located. There's a nice library with internet access and a museum of old clocks. At one intersection in town there is a different protestant church on each of the four corners. The Catholic church is one block north.

**Palmyra** has a small basin with dockage on the south side of the canal, immediately east of the Division Street bridge. Local shops include a used book store, and there is a cluster of small museums. The Aqueduct County Park is a short walk to the west. As mentioned above, it has a historic iron "change bridge," the remains of a canal aqueduct, and access to an active canal lock where the operator will be pleased to provide a tour and explanation of the lock operations.

**Fairport** has piers on both sides of the canal and more extensive shopping and eateries than the previously mentioned towns. The hookups and showers are on the south side; we were charged a mere

\$10 for their use. Fairport is the location of the previously mentioned unusual vertical lift bridge.

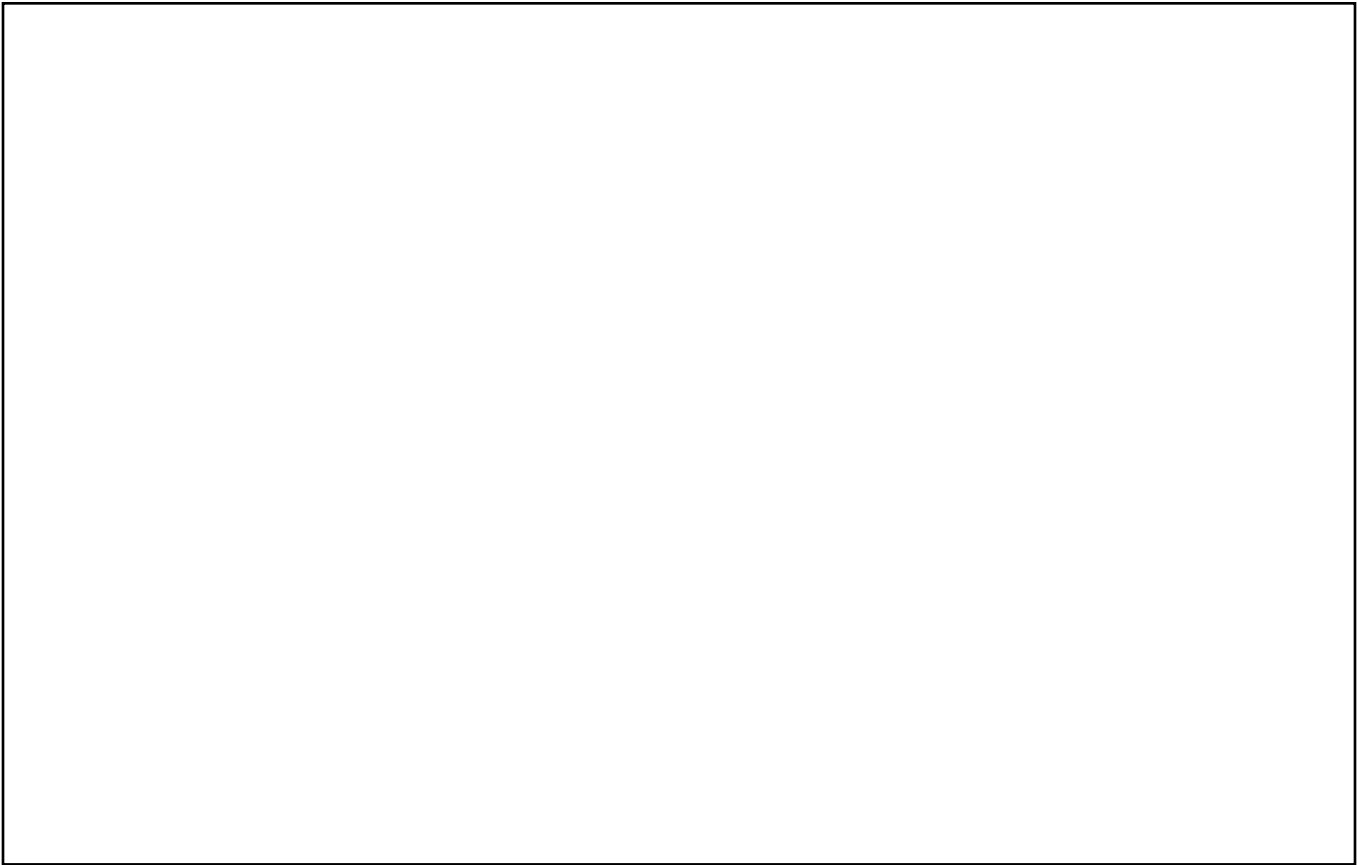
**Rochester** is, from the mariner's point of view, two very different ports separated by a dam, a falls, and a stretch of non-navigable river. At the mouth of the Genesee River lies the harbor described in the GLCC Harbor Report, with recreational and commercial facilities just upstream from Lake Ontario.

The other area of interest lies on the south side of downtown Rochester, about 3 miles downstream from the junction of the Genesee with the Erie Canal. A short distance upstream from the dam, on the west side, lies an urban development area, called Corn Hill Landing, of residences, business offices, restaurants, and shops facing a concrete pier, several hundred feet long, on the river.

This pier is available for transient dockage, with hookups, shower facility, and pumpout. Contact the harbormaster by telephone at 585-232-1760. Restaurants, shops, food store, bakery, and entertainment within walking distance. There are numerous museums in the area including a planetarium, children's museum, and the George Eastman House (history of photography). There is an attractive river falls 5 blocks downstream. Additional information is available at the Corn Hill Landing web site ([www.cornhilllanding.com](http://www.cornhilllanding.com)).

The river is deep upstream but is reported to have areas as shallow as 4 feet near the landing, with soft mud bottom. The river current may be up to 3mph after heavy rains upstream, although it is reported to be negligible most of the time.

*Report and photos by Bob and Marion Gillette  
1/29/2008 rd*



**Above:** remnants of an aqueduct used for the original canal, located just west of the junction of the Cayuga-Seneca Canal in the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. **Below:** the new Palmyra Harbor docks. Photos by Mike Kohut...

